



## **Strengthening Families Family Studies, an Educational Strategy for the Well-being of Maltese Families**

**First National Conference on Family Studies in Malta  
February 16 2008  
Excelsior Grand Hotel Floriana, Malta**

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### **Family Primacy in Malta**

The primacy of family in Malta is very strong (Archdiocese of Malta, 2005; Naudi, 2005). Malta remains one of the most family oriented countries in the EU, with the family still being very much at the heart of personal and social life. There is a strong emphasis on *traditional families* and on *family values* (Abela, 1994), positions stemming from the strong Maltese Catholic tradition. As is the case in all countries, Maltese families are undergoing intense times of transition (Tabone, 1995). They have been, and continue to be, influenced by the sweeping changes effecting the entire Western world: corporate led, neo-liberal globalization; telecommunication and technological innovations; privately owned mass media, consumerism and materialism; postmodernisms; cultural (im)migration; and, especially secularization.

### **Families in Transition**

As well, similar to other nations, people are referring to these changes as *families in crisis*, *a decline in families*, *a breakdown of family values*. I would like to reframe this issue, at the beginning of this talk, by suggesting that families can be defined two ways, by what they look like (a *structural definition*) and by what they *do* for society (a *functional definition* that assumes they are a key social institution). An institution is a custom, practice, relationship, or behavioral pattern of importance in the life of a community or society. Institutions are established, stable and secure organizations in the social, daily life of a people. In 1988, the United Nations General Assembly affirmed that the family is the basic unit of society and therefore merits special attention. To that end, it sanctioned the International Year of the Family (IYF), 1994. Sokalski (1992), the UN Coordinator of the IYF, affirms that the family is a *living, evolving institution*. The International Federation of Home Economics (IFHE) (2004) refers to the family as the one universal human institution where its members are hopefully embedded for most of their lives. Families are psychological, spiritual, and socio-economic units that form the basis of society. This is where most personal decisions are made, which in their universal totality create conditions of the future society. The family is the oldest and most basic unit of human organizations, a critical link between generations, the primary transmitter of culture and values, the sustainer of heritage, and the major provider of food, shelter, and love (Seufert-Barr, 1994).

## **Families as Social Institutions**

From this theoretical position, I believe that families are important to the well-being and growth of society, just like other institutions (the marketplace, labour market, media, faith systems, the economy, the political system, the legal and justice system, the health care system, the telecommunication systems, et cetera). Family units are constantly evolving as they adapt to complex socio-economic and cultural-political changes within their sister institutions. The results are often different family forms and structures, including fewer traditional nuclear and extended families and more common-law, same-sex, divorced/separated, childless, and blended families. Interestingly, as families grapple with the changes emanating from system-wide institutional change, they are said to be *in crisis* or *in decline*; while their sister institutions are said to be *in transition* (passing from one stage or state of affairs to another, an event that results in a transformation). This stance tells me that we live in a society that *does not value family as an institution*, save for its function as producer and consumer (only one of the six functions it fulfills as a social institution).

## **Family Functions**

If we accept that families, as a social institution, fulfil key, pivotal roles and functions in society, we can tease out what these functions include. When it launched the International Year of the Family (1994), the United Nations tendered a functional definition of the family, assuming that it is the cornerstone of society, a key institution. From a functional perspective, a family can be defined as any combination of two or more persons who are bound together by ties of mutual consent, birth and/or adoption or placement and who, together, assume responsibility for, amongst other things:

- the care and physical maintenance of group members. Within healthy families, children, adults and seniors all receive the care and support they need: food, shelter, clothing, protection and so on. Where families are not available or are unable to provide these care services, family members suffer.
- the addition of new members through procreation or adoption as well as fostering. Society renews itself through families.
- the socialization of children into adult roles and responsibilities. Families prepare their children for life. Most do a fairly good job of it, teaching skills, values and attitudes that equip them to learn, work, form friendships and contribute to society.
- the social control of members (setting boundaries, disciplining, mentoring, et cetera). This exercise yields the maintenance of order within the family and groups external to it. Within families, individuals learn, hopefully, positive values and behaviour and receive criticism and lessons for mitigating negative ones.

The Canadian-based Vanier Institute of the Family (2008) suggests that families fulfil these four functions as well as two others:

- production, consumption, distribution of goods and services. Families provide for their own by consuming and producing goods and services. As they strive to fulfil the needs of their members, they play a vital role in the national economy by spending, saving and investing money.
- Maintenance of family morale and motivation to ensure task performance both within family and in other groups. In this regard, families provide the glue that holds society together and keeps it functioning. Beyond providing mere social control, families, through

love and spiritual leadership, inspire, nurture and support their members.

### **Families as a Maltese National Priority**

This conference will help deepen the knowledge of the challenges families face on a daily basis and help make the case that greater importance needs to be given to families and family studies education within the national Maltese agenda. There needs to be a coordinated effort to popularize family studies issues with educators, NGOs and policy makers so that family studies issues become a national concern. Now seems to be an opportune time for such an initiative. A recent article posted at the [www.timesofmalta.com](http://www.timesofmalta.com) website (January 2<sup>nd</sup> 2008) was titled *Political Parties Pledge Focus on Families*. The Prime Minister said that his government is firmly positioning the family at the center of its attention and will continue to strengthen the family. In an October 6 2007 article, he is quoted as saying that human value and the family are the focal point of his vision for Malta. The vision is for everyone to be given the opportunity to be successful and get a better quality of life. I suggest that people cannot take advantage of opportunities unless they are adequately prepared: *Success is when preparation meets opportunities*. This means that individuals and families in Malta cannot hope to take advantage of government-created opportunities that might augment their quality of life unless they are prepared - that preparation can take the form of family studies education.

### **Supportive Family Studies Education in Malta**

I refer you again to Dr. Tabone's assertion that Maltese families are undergoing a time of transition. I agree with him, that the institution of the family in Malta is simply in a state of transition, part of its natural evolution. Families are NOT *the* problem! The Maltese world is not falling apart because of the *declining family*; rather, the Maltese family is being challenged and is changing because of the changing ideologies and attendant belief and value systems in other institutions (especially the economic, geo-political, mass media and consumerism institutions). Families need help to navigate and chart their way through the turbulent waters of social, economic, geo-political, spiritual and technological change. First, they need to be aware of their responsibilities, and then they need help meeting these social obligations (IFHE, 2004). Because they are an institution that is *the essence of transition* (Seufert-barr, 1994), they need to be valued, respected and privileged as a cornerstone of society. To that end, education for families in Malta must become an utmost priority.

Malta has an opportunity to rethink its vision about the goals and implementation of family studies education. I view family studies education as an area of study that strives to help families procure, manage and dispose of resources from their near environments (social/cultural, human built and natural) as they strive to meet their basic needs (food, clothing, shelter, family relations and health), and fulfil their basic functions as a social institution. Family studies education curricula tend to include the topics of: foods and nutrition (and more often now health and wellness); clothing, textiles and apparel; housing and shelter; families across the life span (including early childhood and youth studies and aging families); family relations and human development; consumer and resource management, and parenting. Many processes and skill sets are taught in family studies (in addition to content), including: resource management, problem solving, thinking and reflection, self assertion and advocacy, communication, values clarification, moral reasoning, managing diversity and challenges, career and employment management, and leadership. If done well, family studies education teaches people how to find balance between: (a) coping with stress and change (getting by using new skills); (b) understanding and then adapting

to change while enriching intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships; and, (c) taking political, social action to redress uneven power relationships caused by oppression, exploitation and marginalization of other human beings. The intent is to improve well-being, quality of life and to augment the human condition, no small task.

### **A Family Studies Educational Strategy**

You are encouraged to shape a model of family studies education that is suitable to local Maltese needs and then roll this out across the nation. This involves creating and then promoting family studies as an educational strategy, ideally informed and guided by a set of family-friendly principles (e.g., respect for: diversity, family ties and kinship, need to balance family and work, equality, financial needs, accessible services, needs of vulnerable families, family commitment, stability, resiliency, et cetera). An *educational strategy* comprises patterns of institutional practices designed to support families. The focus when designing an educational strategy is on preferred patterns of actions to be taken by institutions to support families. For our purposes, the practices implemented by institutions would purposefully be designed to support families. The strategy would spell out details for how to plan, develop, allocate resources, network and partner, analyze, implement evaluate strategies to strengthen families as a social institution, especially via family studies education (formal and informal).

Part of this educational strategy involves identifying guidelines for a national implementation strategy for developing the infrastructure required to bring family studies education into the curriculum. Policy makers need to be convinced to invest in family studies education. Part of your conversation can be about whether you prefer to infuse/integrate a *family perspective* into *existing* curricula, create a *new*, stand-alone family studies curriculum, or create a *family perspective* framework that allows learning to be relevant and integrated into student's lives across the curricula and their school lives.

Also, now is the time to have a dialogue about which curriculum philosophy you wish to embrace. Given that families are: (a) in constant transition, leading to transformation and (b) key agents of social change, and given that family studies education is (a) a powerful tool for familial and societal well-being, and (b) an area of education that can inform cultural trends leading to positive cultural transformation, I recommend privileging transformative education. I take this to mean a move away from *transmissional education*, where the teacher has all of the power and the educational system is predicated on measurable outcomes and teacher accountability and a bit further away from *transactional education* that involves a collaborative approach with teacher as facilitator, a thematic and social-problem focused curricula and communities of learners. *Transformative education* is intended to help each learner find his or her own inner power and from this empowered stance (me-power) find the energy to engage in collective social change informed by conscious awareness of the ideologies underpinning their emancipatory activities. The intent is peace, justice, security, freedom and non-violence.

While I might presume to suggest a curriculum philosophy and attendant pedagogies, I would not presume to specify the actual content of your family studies education curriculum. It should be Maltese-specific. I can direct you to recent work undertaken in the United States wherein national standards have been developed for family studies education. These standards provide a platform for generic family studies content, a platform that can be modified, tailored and used for designing curricula, influencing policy and communicating to other areas of education, community representatives, business and industry, family members, and the media about YOUR

family studies education curriculum <http://www.natefacts.org/nationalstandards.htm>

## **Family Values**

I feel compelled to discuss the idea of family values, as they pertain to this conference agenda. A recent survey of Maltese families (conducted for *Times* by Dr. Mario Vassallo) revealed that Maltese citizens deeply believe that marriages should be between men and women (92%) and that marriages should be permanent (no divorce) (85%). They further believed that marriages remain strongest (stay permanent) when there are strong religious values in the home (close to 50%). This conference is intended to affirm and strengthen *family values* in a Maltese Catholic culture. Many believe that these values are declining, that the traditional family value system is being threatened by conflicting politics, immigration and industrialization at a time when Maltese society is starting to become more secularized and culturally diverse.

Family values is a social and political concept employed to describe the set of moral beliefs that develop in response to the perception that there is a decline of *traditional notions* of morality within a nation. This is often referred to as the *breakdown of family values*. Because different sectors of society hold different notions of morality (namely conservative and progressive (Lakoff, 2006)), what counts as a family value (a response to a perceived decline in morality) can differ within cultures and societies, from one household to another and from one generation to another. Conservative morality advocates for family values say members of society should value the nuclear family, heterosexuality, fidelity in marriage, abstinence outside of marriage and all life (no abortion). Progressive morality advocates of family values say members of society should value family planning, affordable child care and parent-friendly employment laws so women can work, alternative family structures (including co-habitation), and sex education. I have seen evidence of both arguments in the Maltese literature and press.

Prompted by a recent Maltese news headline that identified *human value and the family as the focal point of the current government's vision*, I would like to tender the idea of universal or human values that span all cultures, all family types. Universal values have worth for everyone. They contribute to the creation of moral conditions for a sustainable future. Families play a central role in the moral strength of society (through the socialization of children and the responsibility of caring). The United Nations Millennium Declaration, *signed by all nations*, reaffirmed the universal values of: freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, respect for others and shared responsibilities. Universal values also include: love, truthfulness, fairness and unity (Kidder, 1994). Schwartz (1994, 2007) adds 10 universal values (empirically evident in 67 nations): security, conformity (self discipline), self-direction and independent thought, stimulation and challenges, transmission of traditions, enjoying life, benevolence (enhancing welfare of others), power (authority and wealth), and achievement and success.

I envision an intriguing interweaving of traditional Christian family values and universal values as a powerful tool for designing family studies education curriculum. Indeed, Dr. Tabone suggests that Maltese Catholic values are universal values and that the challenge, in Malta's increasingly secularized and culturally diverse society, is to present and transmit these values in a secular way respecting the emergent cultural diversity (personal communication, January 2008). With political will, this can readily be achieved through family studies education. A good upbringing in life-affirming values will definitely serve Maltese society in the long run.

## **Policy Memorandum**

The unabashed intent of this conference is to help make a good case for policy makers of



the need of educating families (namely through the entrenchment of a family studies education curriculum at the national level). An intended result is to increase public awareness of, and develop policies that recognize, the central place family life holds in achieving well-being and quality of life in Malta. The intent is to increase policymakers' awareness of issues that families face as they live day-to-day striving to fulfil their six basic functions, often compromised by their structure (the type of family form they hold). Through this awareness, it is hoped that policies will be developed that promote family well-being and strengthen support for the family as a social institution. Families need to be able to take care of themselves and take care of society and each other (Edgar, 1991). The latter implies that we begin to see families as supporters of society, inferring that society counts on families being supported in this role!

Malta's First National Conference on Family Studies brings together like-minded people intent on clarifying the local social policy context and then framing the outcomes of the conference within this context so you can prepare a *Memorandum* for policy makers. This record of the insights drawn from today's gathering will help policymakers better appreciate the potential role of family studies education in strengthening the family as a social institution. The intent is to help policy makers see the need for a curriculum-based education for families, and to help others appreciate the need to lobby for this to be met logistically, financially and politically. Initiatives at the global level reinforce this laudable conference outcome. In a decade report about the IFY to the UN Commission on Social Development, IFHE (2004) declared that the family is a force of social cohesion and integration, *warranting government attention* in promoting appropriate actions to help families in their supporting, educating and nurturing roles, which if not well executed can lead to family stress, compromised social integration and negative consequences for all sister institutions and future generations.

### **Institute for Family Studies**

I have heard exciting talk about the possible creation of an Institute for Family Studies at the university in Malta with a focus on studies of the family. I understand that Maltese political parties are now saying this is a possibility. Such an institute could serve as a bridge between the university academy (socialization into the field of family studies), interdisciplinary university research, family-focused government departments, agencies and policymakers (education, health, social, economic and labour policies), civil society organizations, the Church, the business sector and Maltese families. You may want to take direction from existing institutions, especially those in place in Canada (VIF) and the Australia Institute of Family Studies.

### **Stakeholder Partnerships and Networking**

I think we can all agree that Maltese families are changing and need support during this transition (leading to transformation). To help people envisage the potential of family studies education in this transitional process, you are invited to focus on what family studies *could be*. This is a forward looking, outside-the-box approach, a *possible futures* approach (shaped by creative use of imaginations) rather than a *probable future* (likely to come about, given the status quo) or a *preferred future* (would like to see happen given current values and priorities).

Another intent of today's gathering is to motivate people to want to do more once the conference is over, especially young people who may be energized by a new vision of education that embraces family studies. Especially, the planners want to initiate interests and action from different stakeholders and even to collaborate on resources. This means people have to leave the conference with enough knowledge to ask and demand further action at all levels. The workshops

planned this afternoon (youth, values, community, health, and education) serve as your launching point. They readily pertain to the six basic functions fulfilled by the family institution and to the basic needs that families constantly strive to meet and augment. Your conversations, today and afterwards, will contribute to the goal of popularizing family studies as a strategic strategy for educating families, such that educators, NGOs and policymakers will embrace families as a priority for national prosperity and transformation. Your Policy Memorandum, developed from multi-disciplinary, multi-sectoral perspectives, can position family studies education curriculum as a pivotal part of Malta's development in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I am honored to be a part of this.

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